

Mel in Congress

Mel Watt in Congress - The Prophecy of George H. White On January 29, 1901 Congressman George H. White of North Carolina delivered his farewell speech on the floor of the United States House of Representatives. He had lost his election in November 1900 when 539 votes had been cast in one township in which there were only 345 registered voters and 492 more people than were registered in another township had voted against him.

George H. White was the last African American Member of Congress following Reconstruction. White concluded his speech with the following historic words: “This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the Negroes’ temporary farewell to the American Congress; but let me say, Phoenix-like, he will rise up some day and come again.”

Over 90 years later, in 1992, Mel Watt and Eva Clayton became the first African Americans elected to Congress from North Carolina since George H. White’s prophetic speech. They were both elected from districts drawn under the Voting Rights Act – districts drawn against a historical backdrop that included the 1900 election stolen from George H. White, North Carolina’s continuing practice of depriving African Americans of the vote by sundry methods and a persistent pattern of racially polarized voting. This backdrop had made it impossible for African Americans to be elected to Congress from North Carolina for over 90 years and it insured that litigation about the legality of the districts would be immediate and protracted.

The U.S. Supreme Court finally resolved the litigation and approved North Carolina’s congressional districts in 2001. By then, Mel Watt’s district had been reconfigured in five different ways and each configuration had been subjected to extensive judicial review.

Through it all, Mel had won reelection handily in each district configuration in which an election was held and he has won reelection to represent North Carolina’s 12th Congressional District in every election since.

In 2005 Mel was unanimously elected Chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC). During his tenure as Chair (2005-06), he successfully refined the agenda of the CBC to refocus on the CBC’s historic mission of closing and eliminating disparities between African Americans and others, led the CBC in crafting the only comprehensive legislation that was introduced in response to Hurricane Katrina and led the successful effort to reauthorize, improve and extend the Voting Rights Act.

Mel’s responsibilities have necessitated substantial international engagement on a broad range of matters, including governance and the rule of law, poverty and development (including

Millennium Challenge matters), HIV/AIDS and other health matters, finance (monetary, accounting and international institutions), law enforcement and counterterrorism (especially issues related to money laundering and financing), protection of intellectual property, human rights and genocide, the environment and many others. This has required travel to a number of countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, South America and the Caribbean.

*A leading CDFI, Self-Help Credit Union, is based in North Carolina and is active in the 12th Congressional District. A non-profit formed by Self Help, the Center for Responsible Lending, has been a strong advocate against predatory lending.